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ABSTRACT

In rural America 34 million culturally and economically diverse women share the common problem of unfair treatment based on sex. Although in recent years women have begun to question the social attitudes limiting their aspirations, a formidable gap exists between their expectations and the archaic legal, social, and economic policies that continue to discriminate against women. These problems are compounded when placed in a rural setting. A substantial number of rural women, particularly black and those of other minorities, are engaged in a desperate struggle for economic survival. A comprehensive federal effort is needed to provide them entry and mobility into the nation's labor market. Adjustable working conditions, recognition of the special physical and emotional pressures working women are under, and day care facilities are also considerations policymakers must address. Rural women also need help in expanding beyond the traditional stereotyped women's roles into entry into traditional male occupations. Special health care services should go beyond programs associated with pregnancy to include general gynecological and internal care for women of all ages. Changes should be made in such discriminatory legal practices as the inheritance tax structure and lenient enforcement of child support and alimony payments. Special attention should be focused on the plight of the elderly, black, native American and hispanic women, especially those whose lives are tied to migrant farmwork and domestic services. Above all, rural women must become involved in the government and community planning process and work to bring about the needed changes. (Author/DS)

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WOMEN IN RURAL AMERICA

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WOMEN IN RURAL AMERICA

In rural America, there are 34 million culturally and economically diverse women who share the common problem of unfair treatment based on sex. Sexual discrimination in rural areas is particularly ironic because women have historically played a pivotal role in the development of the agricultural economy.

Women on the land have worked the crops, picked the harvest, driven tractors, tended livestock, kept the books, raised poultry and even taken on migratory and seasonal farmwork or extra jobs in town to supplement meager income. Rural women whose families have been forced off the land have often become principal wage earners in areas where little or no work was available for their husbands. They have worked long and strenuous hours doing unskilled and uncounted labor -- tending other people's land, houses, clothes and children, while their own families were left behind in dilapidated houses with inadequate food and care.

They were women then
My mama's generation
Husky of voice - Stout of
Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts
How they led
Armies
Headragged Generals
Across mined
Fields
Booby-trapped
Ditches
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must *know*
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves.

-- Alice Walker 1/

1/ Walker, Alice, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". Southern Exposure, Vol. IV, #4, Winter, 1977, p. 64.

In addition to holding jobs for wages, rural women have been responsible for the bearing and caring of children, the management of the home and stabilization of family life. Indeed, many rural women have successfully executed a delicate balancing act, performing multi-dimensional roles in the midst of sexual discrimination.

In spite of the fact that rural women have historically assumed nontraditional roles, only in the 1960's -- as a result of the social contradictions raised during the civil rights movement -- did rural and urban women begin to question archaic social attitudes which limited their aspirations and expectations. Since then, we have witnessed the development of an active and independent women's movement working to: redefine outmoded behaviors, recognize women's achievements and encourage the development of women in control of their lives and destinies.

Unfortunately, however, governmental policies have not kept pace with the articulated needs and desires of women. There exists a formidable gap between rising women's expectations and needed changes in the archaic legal, social and economic policies that continue to discriminate against women. And the problems of women are compounded when placed in a rural setting.

Data on Rural Women is Limited

Rural women's efforts to obtain equal justice are severely handicapped by the lack of adequate research and statistical data describing their conditions and problems in a rural context. There has been no federally sponsored effort to gauge the effect on women of federal programs targeted for rural areas. Sexual identification of rural "man"power is virtually non-existant. Neither agricultural nor manpower data sources have explored the make-up of the rural female labor force to identify wage levels, work hours, sources of income, length of employment, or need for job training, placement and counseling.

Social service agencies have little or no data on the educational and social needs of rural women, their use of available services, their evaluation of service effectiveness, or their suggestions for improvement.

The data that do exist suggest that the male-female income differential remains great while the plight of female-headed households is worsening.

Employment and Earnings

Today, 46% of all women work for wages, earning incomes that are only 57% of male workers. While overall unemployment rates for women are higher than for men, unemployment among black women is significantly higher than white women. The only

available data on the income status of non-metropolitan women was provided in 1970 when the median earnings for non-metro women were 50% below non-metro men, and $800 a year below metropolitan women. Almost 44% of all non-metro poor families were female-headed. 2/

The non-metro black-white women's income differential is even more striking, with non-metro black women's median earnings in 1970 averaging 42% below the non-metro average for women. The number of black female-headed families tripled the non-metro average, with nearly one-quarter of all black non-metro families headed by a woman.

The available statistical data indicates that 40% of the nation's poor live in rural areas and that 40.3% of the total non-metro female-headed families and 68% of the black female-headed families are poor. 3/ We must conclude that a substantial number of rural women, and most particularly black and other minority rural women, are engaged in a desperate struggle for economic survival. Nothing less than a comprehensive federal effort is required to provide them entry and mobility in the nation's labor market.

In order for women to obtain self-sufficiency, they must obtain decent jobs. To obtain decent jobs women must be afforded educational and job training opportunities which allow them to move beyond low paying, sexually stereotyped positions where employed women are concentrated. And they must be afforded equal access and treatment in the job market. Since most working women will be faced with child-rearing responsibilities, they must be provided quality day-care services offering preschool and after-school activities for children.

The conditions for women's active participation in the labor force are mutually dependent, and require a total commitment by policymakers to expand the labor force to include the woman worker. It is equally important to recognize that working women bring a unique set of pressures to the job that are imposed by the unwillingness of men to share homemaking and childcare responsibilities with their working spouses. In the absence of shared responsibilities it becomes increasingly necessary that employment for women provide the needed flexibility to allow for adjustable working conditions that may serve to ease the unusually heavy physical and emotional burden placed on working women.

2/ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Social and Economic Characteristics of the population in Metro and Non-Metro Counties, 1970. Agricultural Economic Report #272, p. 94.

3/ Ibid, p. 94.

Education and Training

The federal government has recently produced its first study examining the educational needs of rural women written by the National Advisory Council on Women's Education Programs.4/ The Council reported that women's educational needs are greatest in isolated, sparsely-populated low-income rural areas where access to educational opportunity is low and delivery costs are high. They found that little attention in the field of education was directed toward the needs of rural women, either by educators, rural development advocates or the advocates for other women's programs. The report questioned the assumption that males and females benefit equally from governmental efforts to improve the quality of life in rural areas and challenged the OMB and other federal agencies to document this assumption by producing data on the benefits accrued to both sexes.

The Advisory Council advanced a variety of useful recommendations for rural women's education. They recommended that the federal government:

1. Establish a national rural education policy designed to meet special needs of isolation, poverty and underemployed women;

2. Improve the variety, quality and delivery of educational opportunity available for rural women;

3. Provide much needed data documenting the effects of educational programs on rural women.

Rural women interviewed during the Advisory Council study pointed out the need to provide instruction in sex-role development to end the traditional stereotyping of women's roles and to encourage women to expand their experiences beyond the homemaker role. They cited the need for educational opportunities to allow woman's particiration in extra-curricular activities traditionally reserved for boys, and recommended the increased use of women counselors, teachers, lecturers to focus on women's scholarly contributions and who can encourage the preservation of rural values and culture.

However, the issue of paramount concern to rural women was the inadequate provision of job training and career counseling. A combination of constraints including high unemployment, coupled with the availability of a minimal level of low-paying, sexually-stereotyped jobs, made job training and counseling the high priority item for rural women's education. Needed are

4/ National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, Educational Needs of Rural Women and Girls, by Kathryn Clarenbach, January, 1977.

career development specialists, counselors and training personnel who can recognize the special skills of rural women and who can develop positions in job markets to utilize these skills. Too often job training has been provided for traditional women's positions, and little has been done to train women for entry into traditional male occupations. Rural women are especially excited about careers in agriculturally-related work and emphasize the fact that 25% of all agricultural college majors today are women. 5/

Health

The health problems facing rural women are numerous. The major problem in rural areas is the lack of health care service delivery. Rural health care services are costly and frequently unavailable in isolated areas. The lack of availability of primary and secondary care services has meant that rural residents are far less likely than urban residents to receive basic preventive health services. It is not surprising to learn that the likelihood of rural women receiving breast examinations and pap smears is lower than that of urban women. 6/ Similarly, rural residents are about 40% less likely to receive such preventive services as electrocardiograms, chest x-rays, eye examinations.

When women's health issues are addressed, they are almost exclusively raised within the context of child-bearing. Both health care statistical indicators and special impact programs have concentrated on the child-bearing aspects of women's health. Infant mortality rates are commonly used as an indicator of the quality of women's health conditions. Likewise, special health services to rural women have focused on the improvement of prenatal health care and on the proper nutrition for women during pregnancy and lactation. 7/

While it is extremely important that women receive the proper care during pregnancy, it is equally important that women are provided general gynecological and internal care whether or not they decide to become mothers. Yet, rural women have consistently criticised health providers for their lack of sensitivity to women's health problems. One important factor

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5/ Ibid. p. 28.

6/ Davis, Daren and Marshall, Ray. Primary Care Services for Medically Underserved Populations. November 1976, p. 35.

7/ Examples of health care services designed for women as mothers include the WIC program (Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children) providing food for new mothers and young children; Maternal and Child Health Programs authorized under Title V of the Social Security Act for rural areas and Services for Adolescent Mothers, funded by Bureau of Community Health Services.

contributing to this lack of concern about women's health problems is the gross underrepresentation of women in professional health care positions. In 1973, although women represented 80% of the health labor force, they were only 9% of the physicians, 12% of the pharmacists and 3% of the nation's dentists. 8/ Women health care professionals have been especially scarce in rural areas, and so the responsiblity for educating women about their bodily functions has fallen on their mothers or on male physicians. Since discussion of sexuality between sexes has been a social taboo in many rural communities, little by way of information has been provided rural women. It is little surprise that rural women have developed negative feelings about their bodies or have received sexual edcation based on incorrect myths and hearsay. Efforts to bring about greater awareness in rural women of their own sexuality have been aided in recent years by the education and training made available through innovations in rural health delivery such as the community health programs offered in rural comprehensive health care centers. There remains much to be done both in the areas of health services provision and in researching the special health needs of rural women.

Other Concerns

The legal status of women is of vital concern to women in rural America. Much of women's unequal treatment before the law has been the result of the failure of our social and legal systems to recognize the homemaker as an economic contributor to the support of the family. Women's careers in the home are not afforded the same value and prestige as careers outside the home. The devaluation of work in the home has resulted in a series of discriminatory legal practices which assume that the wife has made no economic contribution to the acquisition of property.

Farm wives have been significantly affected by the sexually biased inheritance tax structure which is based on the assumption that all property (joint property included) is owned by the husbands. Therefore, if a farm wife dies, the husband pays no tax on joint property, but if a husband dies, the wife must pay an inheritance tax. The International Women's Year Conference addressed the federal inheritance tax problem in its recommendations for rural women's rights:

8/ The Women's Work Project, Union for Radical Political Economics and the Political Education and Action Project, Women in Health, p. 5.

> "While the 1976 Federal inheritance tax reform increased the exemption allowed a surviving spouse, the law still does not recognize that a wife's labor on the farm has earned her the same right provided her husband to ownership of accumulated capital. This problem affects most heavily family farmers where property evaluations are high and available cash to pay taxes is ordinarily low." 9/

Rural women and children are also affected by the legal system's failure to provide economic safeguards in divorce decrees that result in lenient enforcement of child-support and alimony payments. Despite the fact that divorced women are awarded child-support in only 44% of the cases (and alimony in only 14% of the cases), only 45% of the child-support payments are received on a regular basis.

Much remains to be done to assure rural women equality of opportunity and treatment. Special attention is needed on the plight of black, native American and hispanic women, especially those whose lives are tied to migrant farmwork and domestic service. The needs of the rural elderly women are particularly poignant in the area of old age, social security and survivor's benefits. Above all, rural women must become actively involved in the governmental and community planning process. It is only by making themselves heard that change can be effected.

9/ International Women's Year: "Rural Women", Summary and Background to Recommendations, November 1977.